

Does Mitt Romney Really Think Europe is the Enemy?

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Mitt Romney is close enough to the Republican nomination for president, and in fact the presidency itself, that his comments can no longer be entirely discounted because he is in the middle of a campaign. For this reason, his speech following his win in the New Hampshire primary on Tuesday raises some serious questions and provides some insight into the problems with his, and his parties view of the world and foreign relations. Towards the beginning of his speech, Romney said “He (President Obama) chastises friends like Israel; I’ll stand with our friends.” This is standard campaign rhetoric based on the conservative criticism of Obama’s Israel policy.

Only a few moments later Romney, again speaking about the President stated “He wants to turn America into a European-style entitlement society... The President takes his inspiration from the capitals of Europe.” In the speech’s closing statement, Romney referred to “the worst of what Europe has become.” Romney, only moments after pledging to be all but uncritical of America’s friends chastised, to put it mildly, Europe. There are two possible explanations for this. Either Romney cannot follow the not very rigorous logic of his own assertions, or he does not consider European countries to be friends of the U.S. Neither one of these is a comforting explanation.

While Romney is not the first Republican to use anti-European rhetoric in this manner, he is also no longer just a Republican politician. He is one of the two people most likely to be president of the U.S. in 53 weeks. Coming from a potential president, these kinds of jibes against Europe should be seen differently. Romney may legitimately believe that European style social democracy is bad for the U.S., or as is more likely, believe that caricaturing European policies is much easier than explaining his party’s policies of anti-poor class warfare of the last generation. Nonetheless, it is very dangerous for an American president to not have a full understanding of the value of the U.S. relationship with many European countries, or to jeopardize that relationship through over-heated campaign slogans.

Romney’s speech also reflects a view of what constitutes a friend that is worth exploring. Israel and the U.S. obviously enjoy a very close relationship, but it is a relationship that is also characterized by an enormous amount of foreign assistance flowing to Israel from the U.S. Accordingly, Israel, unlike, for example, Germany or the U.K., needs the U.S. to an extent that precludes meaningful Israeli criticism of, or disagreement with, the U.S. A similar dynamic exists between the U.S. and other states which are major recipients of U.S. assistance, for example, Georgia. Romney’s view of friendship suggests that the U.S. should remain close only with those countries which, out of geopolitical necessity, must be almost entirely pro-U.S. European countries, particularly those in western Europe, however, are not really friends, in his view, because they occasionally differ the U.S. and have different approaches to regulating capitalism. This is an odd and limited understanding of friendship, and a destructive approach to foreign policy.

The U.S. should value all of its allies, not just those who are too dependent on the U.S. to be able to criticize it. Moreover, demonizing the domestic policies of all European countries is extremely narrow-minded and demonstrates an unwillingness to explore policy options. The U.S. should not necessarily try to be like Europe, but to view it as axiomatically impossible that a European country would have a policy worth emulating will limit U.S. ability to apply good solutions to a range of problems in areas such as the environment, infrastructure or education.

It also remains true that despite differences on economic policies, some foreign policy issues, and the role of religion in society, the powerful countries of western Europe remain the the most important and useful allies the U.S. has. Combating Jihadist terror, addressing climate change-whether or not Romney believes in it-, getting the global economy back on track and supporting human rights and democracy, among other 21st century foreign policy challenges the U.S. faces will be exponentially more difficult without European cooperation. We can only hope that Romney must know this, and that his speech in New Hampshire can be ignored.